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BIRTH-CONTROL AND BIOLOGICAL ETHICS.

WARNER FITE.

TO THE moral philosopher the question of birth-control, more popularly stated in terms of "race-suicide," is a question of peculiar interest. There are few questions which have so large a practical significance and at the same time cut so deeply into the foundations of ethical theory.

There are also few other questions of equal importance which are left in equal obscurity; and none, perhaps, which can show a more complete reversal of ideas, among practical moralists and social reformers, within a comparatively short period. In 1797 Malthus published the first edition of his "Essay on Population," in which he pointed out that the possibilities of social progress were being largely set at naught by the constant pressure of population upon subsistence. At once he became the target for all those who stand for natural instinct as against reflective intelligence. But at the same time birth-control became gradually the mark of a superior sense of moral responsibility. About the middle of the century, however, after the appearance of the "Origin of Species," the tide began to turn from intelligence back to nature. It was now discovered that man is a biological species, and that the seemingly uncontrollable intensity of the sexual instinct is a sacred provision of nature for the perpetuation of the race. Since then the teachings of professional social reformers have been rather in favor of fruitfulness and multiplication, with qualifications in recent years in favor of the best. The result is that those who were commended for wisdom and virtue by the Malthusians are now execrated as traitors to their race.

At the same time it would be difficult to find another question which can present us with so marked a contradiction between legal commandment and private practice and between social convention and private conviction.

The statistics of population render it almost certain that the check upon birth-rate, which operates more or less among all classes of all civilized countries, not excluding our southern negroes—the exceptions, in themselves significant, being found mainly in Roman Catholic countries—is voluntary and prudential. The most emphatic of those who denounce “race-suicide” can rarely show families that measure up to the good, old-fashioned standard. The theory that diminished fertility naturally accompanies an advance in culture and intelligence seems slightly grounded. Nor may we believe that the result is attained by the simple abstention from sexual relations. In private conversation the contrary is accepted as the mutually understood fact. Yet in any but strictly private conversation we seem to have agreed to denounce all interference with natural processes as a form of “unnatural vice.” In most of the states the law forbids the sale of anything to prevent conception, but the law is a dead letter. The medical man, when asked for information, coughs apologetically behind his hand and pleads his medical ethics; and then he proceeds to tell all that he knows. The Department of Public Morality at Washington, commonly called the Post Office, exercises its extraordinary bureaucratic powers—powers that are scarcely paralleled in any civilized country outside of Russia—to exclude from the mails all literature relating to the subject. This does not prevent the dissemination of knowledge among the more intelligent or the more curious. The chief result is that decently-minded persons are referred to illicit, uncertain, and often unedifying sources of information.

Still more interesting, from the standpoint of the critic, is the fact that the propaganda against “race-suicide” is directed chiefly against the married. One hears occasional derogatory references to those who prefer a single life—a hint, perhaps, of selfishness and love of comfort—but few seem quite ready to insist that those who are positively disinclined to marriage, or those who are unable to find a congenial partner, ought nevertheless to marry for

the sake of the race. And, of course, there is no recommendation of illegitimate children. It seems, moreover, that even the married may escape reproach if only they are willing to maintain Platonic relations; indeed, it is not impossible that Platonic marriage may be exalted and birth-control execrated in the same breath. This suggests that hostility to birth-control may be not unmixed with primitive superstition. The theory seems to be that Nature, or the Almighty, having in mind our natural depravity, has, for the purpose of preserving the species, made the sex-instinct especially powerful; and that we, on our side, are permitted a degrading gratification in return for services rendered. We may decline to avail ourselves of the privilege—perhaps the Almighty will think better of us if we do. But to accept the pleasure and withhold the payment is a piece of sharp practice. In this connection I am reminded irresistibly of an editor's footnote in an old American edition of Butler's "Analogy," which I here reproduce:

Hume says, "though man, in truth, is a natural agent, having all his acts determined by fixed and immutable laws, yet this being concealed from him, he acts with the conviction of being a free agent." Which is the same as to say that God intended to conceal from men an important fact, involving the whole subject of right and wrong, but Mr. Hume found Him out.

The scientific argument against birth-control is based upon the biological conception of man as an animal species, a conception which has been dominant in the interpretation of all human affairs since the introduction of the theory of evolution in the middle of the last century. For a generation bred upon biological evolution it is a little difficult to realize the full measure of the change which this conception has introduced into all of our views of human life. While the older moralists were asking themselves whether self-sacrifice is rational, as if it were a matter for human reason to determine, Herbert Spencer pointed out that, in the biological world—to which we also in some manner belong—self-sacrifice is already more or less common. Even those

animals whose dominant protective instincts point to flight may become savage antagonists in defence of their young; on whose behalf the female, in particular, may go to greater lengths of self-forgetfulness than we should expect of most human mothers. Among the insects we find cases where the male in the act of procreation gives up his life, sometimes at the hand of the female herself—as if in fulfilling this duty his reason for being had ceased. Arguing from a purely human standpoint, we are apt to say that the first law of nature is self-preservation. The theory of evolution shows us, however, that in nature, in which we live and move and have our being, the law of self-preservation is subordinate to the law of the preservation of the species,

So careful of the type she seems,
So careless of the single life.

This is the conception underlying the hostility to birth-control; to interfere with the processes of reproduction for purposes of our own is to set aside the will of Nature.

Coincident with the progress of evolutionary ideas, we have noted a growing tendency to emphasize the “social” factor in human affairs. So far has this gone that in present theory morality appears to be exclusively a matter of social obligation; and even those who hesitate before the formal acceptance of socialism are nevertheless disposed to think of all vice as a form of “individualism.” From this point of view, birth-control is an offence against society; though it is a little difficult to make out precisely against whom the offence is committed—hardly, I should say, against those who, by virtue of birth-control, are never to be. Christian moralists rejoice to see in all this “socially-mindedness” a triumph of brotherly love; but, in my opinion, somewhat prematurely. The personal quality of brotherly love seems rather remote from economic socialism (for example); nor does “the social organism” suggest very strongly “the communion of saints”; while the primitive clan, the solidarity of which furnishes a standing ground of admiration for contemporary ethics,

is only one step this side of the animal species. The truth is that, paradoxically, there is hardly a suggestion of personal fellowship in this emphasis upon the social. "Society" is really only another term for the biological species. And the "social" argument for fruitfulness and multiplication rests, in the last analysis, not upon the needs of a self-conscious humanity, but upon the external demands of a personified "Nature."

Now it is primarily this biological point of view against which—to state my purpose frankly—the present argument is directed. I have no disposition to urge that the race commit "suicide"—to give a literal significance to the sensational formula. Nor am I disposed to regard nature as an enemy. But I hold that the ways of nature are authoritative for man only so far as they commend themselves to human intelligence in the satisfaction of humanly appreciable needs; that these needs must be in some sense the needs of humanity itself, and of humanity in the present tense; and that, as authoritative upon the individual, they must be in some intelligible sense his own needs. So far as the ways of nature can be comprehended by us, it is both our right and our duty, as intelligent beings, to control them for our own uses. This applies both to the regulation of the number of offspring and to the means of regulation. And I make express mention of the means, because in the question before us the means appear to raise an even deeper ethical question than the end.

Criticism of the biological point of view in ethics is, of course, not a criticism of biology. Nor shall I claim that the biological point of view is irrelevant to an analysis of human conduct. Rather must we say that for ethics and psychology the consideration of man as one of the animal species has been nothing less than a revelation. But it is quite possible that a too intensive illumination may be blinding. The present I take to be a case in point. In the contemplation of the similarities between men and the lower animals, as revealed by the theory of evolution, it seems that we have completely lost sight of the differences. And

the differences are such as to make the similarities seem almost insignificant. I may summarize them in one sentence: among the vast number of animal species, man is the only animal who knows that he is an animal; he is the only animal who is also a biologist.

This difference has a wide range of implication. Man is the only animal that can be said to have a history; that is to say, the only animal who lives to-day in the light of accumulated racial experience. He is the only animal who has a science; the only animal who can survey the present fact in the light of facts that are temporally and spatially remote. He is the only animal who may properly be said to have a society; that is, the only animal who can be conceived to act here and now in the light of recognized relations to his absent fellows. He is also the only animal who can be conceived to have any clear consciousness of family relations. I prefer not to dogmatize about animal psychology, for it is always conceivable that animals have a social and cultural life of their own, and that while we are referring the actions of ants to unconscious instinct, they may be making the same observations with regard to us. But taking the animals simply as they appear to us, as being, for example, innocent of physiology, it seems hardly probable that the dog perceives any relation of cause and effect between his copulation with the bitch and a phenomenon temporally so remote as the birth of a pup;¹ nor may we suppose that the bitch retains a consciousness of her parental relation after the period of infancy is past. And any knowledge of remoter cousinships seems quite out of the question. In a word, then, as distinguished from the lower animals, man is not merely more developed, or more "efficient"; he is distinguished from other animals by the fact that he has a "culture"; and this means that he offers the only case in the animal kingdom where the

¹ Spencer and Gillen (*Northern Tribes of Central Australia*) claim that the Australians are ignorant of the relation of father and child; but this claim, at least as applied to some of the tribes, appears to be at variance with their own observations.

processes of life are surveyed and analysed from the standpoint of those in whom they are taking place.

And this is to say also that he is the only animal to whom we may in any significant sense apply the term "moral"; he is the only animal who is capable of directing his actions according to a clearly conceived purpose, or reasoned judgment of value. And I specify "in any significant sense" because I do not wish to deny absolutely the presence in animals of either morality or reason. I confine myself to the probability that, as compared with men, their range of imagination (including memory) is extremely limited. And imagination, in this broader sense, I take to be the foundation of all value. Value exists in the world only for those who have imagination; only for those who can remember, forecast, analyse, compare, and connect; that is to say, only for persons. When, therefore, we apply the conception of value to biological processes, we are assuming the point of view of a person. The question is then, For whom? When the individual gives up his life for the preservation of the species, whose purpose is fulfilled? The biological point of view seems to reply, For the purpose of the species? But, as I have just pointed out, the individual lower animal knows nothing of the species; nor is the species, so far as we can see, aware of itself. If there be any purpose connected with the species, it must be the purpose of an external intelligence. The theologian may then say that the purpose is God's purpose; or the poet may say, Nature's purpose. But the moral philosopher, who begins with human experience, is compelled to admit that the only purposes of which he is certainly aware are our purposes. He may then proceed from this point to attribute a purpose to Nature or to God; and this will doubtless be a matter for consideration in the determination of our own purposes. But throughout the argument the fact of our purposes stands; and the purposes are ours.

For it is not enough to say that "value," in the abstract, is created by our consciousness of self. The more important fact, for our purpose, is that the values created are

values for self, valuable from the point of view of the person who creates them. In becoming self-conscious I cease to be valuable merely for others and become valuable for self; or, in Hegelian phrase, that which was formerly only "being for others" is now also "being for self." I may illustrate this important distinction by pointing to the food-cattle. Here we have a clear case of a species which is bred for a purpose. In relation to this purpose the cattle have a value, but it is a value for others. Any value that they may have for themselves we assume to be fully satisfied by keeping them well fed and putting them to death without any unnecessary terror or pain. But this view of the matter depends wholly upon the assumption that their self-consciousness is equally negligible, namely, that the cattle are incapable of suspecting that they are to be killed for food. If they were capable of this, they would also be capable of refusing to breed. And in that refusal we should recognize a moral right. If the cattle could voice such a complaint to us, after the fashion of the cattle in the fables, I am sure that the number of vegetarians would immediately increase. For, through the mere fact of self-consciousness, a new element is introduced into the moral computation and a new person is created with rights of his own.

Now, whether or not we are logically justified in attributing a rational purpose to nature, I shall not pretend to say. We have to remember that the theory of natural selection was suggested to Darwin by the point of view of the stock-breeder, and it is quite possible that in applying this conception to nature we get only the reflection of the stock-breeder's point of view. But assuming a purpose in nature—or assuming that she has no purpose—I say that the laws of nature control the individual and exercise a binding force upon him only so far as—for him—they work unconsciously. For the ethical and psychological individual they have no binding power except so far as they derive that power from his own judgment of value. I will even go further and say that when we make the laws of

nature absolute in the physical world we presuppose that they work unconsciously. For suppose any individual, animal or machine, to become at any point conscious of the nature and the tendencies of the activities at work in him: the first clear consciousness of this fact will express itself in the statement, Here am I. And what am I doing? And why am I doing it? And the "why" will mean, What rational interest have I—now a rational person, with ideas of my own—in doing this thing? In any being capable of putting this question it is inconceivable that the laws of nature should pursue their course untroubled. In human relations, as soon as we become conscious of any foreign will working its way in us—the will, say, of the advertiser, or the salesmen, the life-insurance agent, or the politician—that will is as such at once dethroned. If the foreign will is now to be authoritative, its authority must be based upon interests of our own. And this will be true whether the other will is the will of society, of nature, or of God. No person can, with a clear self-consciousness, choose to be eternally damned, for the glory of God, for the glory of society, or for the glory of the species.

Of the activities which are in process of becoming self-conscious the sexual activities of human beings are a typical illustration. If nature is the great stock-breeder, then we shall say that among her various species man is the only animal that really knows that he is being bred. And more than that, he is the only animal which can be assumed to have any intimate knowledge of the reproductive process. His knowledge is far from complete. Our human life as a whole is a mingling of conscious and of unconscious processes, with the unconscious in a large majority. And for all of our study, the processes of reproduction are still largely mysterious. Yet our knowledge is sufficient to place them more or less under our control. Nature ordains that sexual intercourse shall be determined by the physical conditions of propinquity and by the physiological conditions determining sexual desire; and then that the fact of intercourse shall commit us inevitably

to its natural result. By our knowledge, however, we are enabled more or less to treat the cause and the effect separately and to determine the conditions for ourselves. And this knowledge, as a feature of our self-consciousness with regard to the activity as a whole, profoundly alters the ethics of the situation.

For, to consider the sex-relation first, it reverses the relation of means and end. From the biological standpoint, the sex-relation is a means for Nature's ends; it has no other meaning. But no self-conscious human being can regard his sexual life as a means for the ends of others. By the very fact of his self-consciousness this function, otherwise merely physiological, has become deeply personal and intimately his own. And therefore, while for Nature the sex-relation is only a means, for those intending to marry it is the first and most important part of the end. As a personal relation marriage is its own justification. And this view of the matter, so far from indicating a disregard for moral considerations, is one of the most distinct marks of a higher civilization. Precisely as we advance towards a more refined humanity do we come to feel that in the relation of marriage no ulterior considerations can take precedence of personal choice. Upon grounds of expediency we may forbid certain unions, but it hardly occurs to us to command. We call it prostitution to sacrifice the personal choice for pecuniary gain; from the personal standpoint, biology aside, it seems not less prostitution when the end is the propagation of the species. Certainly a proposal of marriage in these disinterested terms would seem horrible and grotesque. And if it be objected that the moral sanction applies to the personal rather than the sexual relation, the reply will be that of this personal relation the sex-relation is an inseparable part. A man and a woman may have a warm affection for one another where sex plays no part. But this means that the intimacy of thought and feeling has also certain well defined limits. An exclusion of the sex-relation from married life tends

clearly to personal estrangement, if not also to nervous disorder.

I may carry the point further. Among many of the lower animals the operation of the sex-instinct appears to be more or less seasonal and sporadic, and when the bodily need is not actively present the relation appears to be forgotten. The operation of the instinct is thus restricted to its racial utility. This fact is often used as an evidence of the superior normality, if not also of the superior chastity, of the lower animals, and the relatively constant presence of the sex-motive in human life is treated as a sign of decadence and corruption. Such an argument I take to be merely a naïve reflection of the biological point of view. If the sexual life of the animals is more "normal," it is only because the animals are lacking in imagination. On the other hand, this lack of imagination reduces the whole of the sex-life of animals to the status of a merely physical need. From the standpoint of a self-conscious agent, it is precisely normal that a relation which is perceived to be desirable should be cultivated and extended. And if this results, among coarser men, in a sensual and obscene imagination, then still I say that even this is a more positively spiritual fact than no imagination whatever.

But I am not arguing for the luxuries of sensualism. I think that it must be a rather dim self-consciousness which can perceive in the sex-desire no larger significance than in the desire for a glass of wine or a beefsteak. The primary fact that emerges from the least reflective analysis of the desire is that it is a desire for another person. In other words, though animal in its beginnings, and sensuous to the end—since human life is never disembodied—to one in whom the desire attains a clear self-consciousness the sex-desire reveals itself as, in the last analysis, a desire for personal intimacy of a unique and precious kind. And this connects it with all that is most valuable in human life.

For if you ask me what is this most valuable thing—what is the *summum bonum* for self-conscious beings—I shall reply that it consists in the cultivation of personal

humanity through personal relations. From the biological standpoint a personal relation of any kind is simply a means to an end; the relation itself adds nothing to the content of the end. If animals go in herds, it is not for the cultivation of social intercourse, but for mutual protection. And this, as I have suggested, is the standpoint underlying the prevailing conception of society. "Society," in the usual sociological acceptance, is really only a vast business organization for the maintenance of life. Accordingly, personal relations not necessary to this end are treated as superfluous, except as they may be justified upon grounds of necessary recreation. With this view belongs also the doctrine that the end of education is vocational efficiency. All of this belongs to the logic of the biological standpoint. On the other hand, the point of view of a self-conscious humanity is embodied in the conception of *culture*. "Culture," a word so often misused, stands simply for the development of the person as an end in himself. From this point of view the end and essence of social life is to be found in social life itself, in the development of the possibilities of humanity through *personal* relations. In the cultivation and enjoyment of one another through mutual understanding and fellowship, not as members of a social organization, but as individual persons, and in the spiritual advancement growing out of this mutual cultivation, we have at once the highest good and the end in relation to which natural processes and economic organization are to be treated as means.

Now, among these personal relations none is more replete with significance than the sex-relation, and none makes a richer contribution to the content of life. I will not exaggerate by saying that its significance is exclusive or supreme. It is true that in classical literature the sex-motive seems relatively unimportant; and the emphasis laid upon it in modern literature is probably too exclusive. Yet it is a mistake to assume that the classical literature is finer because this motive is lacking. On the contrary, it seems to me that it is just the peculiar in-

sensibility of classical literature to the personal aspect of sex-relations that makes us often wonder why the classics are especially distinguished as "humane."

I have dwelt upon this point because it seems to me that in any discussion of the ethics of birth-control, the rights of the marriage relation as an end in itself are bound to hold a central position. And if marriage is to be regarded as an end, and not merely as a means, it seems to me that the conclusion is obvious: as an end important in itself, marriage should represent a choice unencumbered, as far as possible, by extraneous obligations; and this means that, within the limits of health and safety, we are justified in employing all the resources of knowledge to render marriage fertile or infertile, as those in question may see fit. At any rate, a question of this kind is to be settled by those concerned, from the standpoint of marriage itself. The control of natural processes for human rather than for merely natural ends is now generally accepted as the mark of an enlightened humanity. We have left behind us the day when the use of anesthetics in child-birth could be condemned on the ground that the pains were divinely ordained. It seems to me that the outcry against birth-control is a survival of this discarded point of view; and that it stands, not for a higher morality, but only for primitive superstition, fortified by a biological view of life.

Coming now to the broader question, of birth-control irrespective of the means, I shall confine myself—since my chief purpose is to outline the ethical principle rather than to consider the economic details bearing upon its application—to a brief expansion of the statement that, for an enlightened human being, the question of regulating the number of his children is, so far as the question is an open one, a question of utility, like any other question—for example, the question of building a house. It differs from this question only in calling for a larger and more humane consideration of the utilities.

And therefore to stand for birth-control does not mean that childlessness is to be regarded as a virtue. I find myself disposed to regard those whom I suspect of being voluntarily childless as curiously deficient in human sensibilities—unless I can conceive the probability of a good reason. But upon my own reckoning, I should say that no good reason is to be found in the love of ease and comfort, or of social distraction, or in professional ambition, or in devotion to the arts. As a source of intelligent satisfaction and an enrichment of personal life, it seems to me that children count for more than any of these. They also cost more in terms of thought and responsibility—incalculably more. But everywhere in life it is true that the best things cost the most, and I think that we are entitled to hold a more or less mean opinion of those who refuse to purchase. Yet this is far from recommending unrestrained reproduction. There are many good reasons why the size of every family should be limited. And among them I hold that an excellent reason is just that reason which is most often condemned; that, namely, which considers the possibility, not merely of supporting the family, but of giving one's children a fair start in life, as measured generally by the social standing of the parents. An even more imperative reason is that which measures from all points of view the burden to be carried by the mother. Those who talk glibly about the good, old-fashioned family seem commonly unaware of the fact that many of those families of a dozen or more children represented a succession of two or three mothers. There are also good reasons why some families should be wholly childless. And in the last analysis I say that the question of obligation is a question of the individual interest, broadly considered. I may explain to the childless man or woman that in his own interest he is making a mistake; but if he can convince me of the contrary, I can urge no obligation.

This means that when an individual is urged to bring children into the world for the purposes of society, he is entitled to ask why. What is he to get out of it? And

what are his children to get out of it? If the purpose be to furnish a plentiful supply of food for cannon, in the interest, perhaps, of certain ruling classes, then I think that he may properly object. A good deal of wit has been lately expended upon the sentimental song, "I didn't raise my boy to be a soldier" (of which I have heard only the title), but why any one who knows what it is to "raise" a boy, who thinks of the anxious affection expended by the parents and the high hopes and ambitions aroused in a boy successfully "raised"—why he should then think it worth while to raise boys for this purpose, is beyond my power to conceive. And if the purpose be merely to furnish a plentiful supply of unskilled labor for the development of capital—which I seem to detect as one of the motives underlying the hostility to birth-control—I think that he may again object. Addressed to capitalistic parents, the argument is irrelevant; to the non-capitalistic, it is invalid.

And if I were arguing the question from a racial standpoint, I should undertake to show that nothing proves more clearly than a consideration of the supply of unskilled labor the need of birth-control for any general diffusion of culture and civilization. For all higher culture presupposes economic freedom. The Greek culture, enjoyed by a few, rested upon a basis of slave-labor. Modern culture, considerably more diffused, is based upon mechanical invention. It is probably correct to say that modern scientific attainment is more than anything else the result of improved means of communication. But as long as there is a plentiful supply of unskilled labor, there will be no progress in mechanical invention. It is only because slavery is now impossible and unskilled labor relatively scarce, that our civilization is more comprehensive and on the whole a higher civilization than the Greek; and the only safeguard against retrogression is a proper measure of birth-control.

We may be told, however, that the purpose of fruitfulness and multiplication is to maintain the American stock. Then the question arises, In what position do we wish to

maintain the American stock? Do we wish to maintain it at the present economic level? If so, the purpose is best accomplished by limiting the American family to those who can be given a fair start in life. But if the American stock is to be degraded, there would seem to be no reason why it should be maintained; certainly not, from the standpoint of those who are to be represented in the stock. And if a more broadly social standpoint is to prevail, then I should say that the obligation rests upon those especially interested to see that, either by state aid—which is hardly conceivable—or by private endowment, special inducements in the form of assistance in the nurture and education of children, are offered for the propagation of the American stock. Private responsibility for the support and education of children presupposes that a man's children are his own. If children are to be brought into the world for the uses of society, it is for society to pay the bill.

Or are fruitfulness and multiplication to be recommended simply for the maintenance of the race? Now, I am far from thinking that the race should come to an end. But I believe that, as intelligent beings, supposedly emancipated from superstition, we are at least entitled to ask why the race should go on. And it seems to me that for the affirmative side the present is a rather inopportune time to raise the question. If the civilization of the future is to be merely a repetition of what it has come to now—and some wise persons tell us that it will never be different—then it seems to me clearly better that the race should not go on.

Nor is it wholly a question of a better time coming. One of the natural results of a view of life based exclusively upon evolution has been a glorification of the future and an exaltation of the duty of self-sacrifice for the present generation. Upon what rational grounds such a duty can be recommended, we are not clearly told. Perhaps if we could believe that by our sacrifice social and racial problems could be once for all solved, we should find the end to be worth our while. But to any reflective mind such

expectation must appear illusory. In the nature of the case evolution is an unending series of new wants that are developed through the satisfaction of old; if no new wants appeared, evolution, and life itself, would come to an end. We may therefore anticipate that for any future generation life will be as problematic as it is for us. I am not sure that this is a pessimistic conclusion. But it seems to show that we are justified in allowing the future generations to take some responsibility for themselves; and on the other hand it is quite conceivable that the best that we can do for them will coincide pretty closely with the best that we can do for ourselves. I am inclined to think that this is the case with birth-control. In any case, it should be clear that a life process which consists only in a series of sacrifices—the present generation sacrificing itself for the next, which again sacrifices itself for the next, and so *ad infinitum*—is an absurd conclusion for a race of supposedly rational beings.

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